

After a Disaster: Recovery Safety Tips

When natural disasters strike, you must take care of yourself and your family first. There are serious problems to deal with before recovery begins. Illness or injury may result from contaminated water, debris-filled roadways, electrical and fire hazards, and displaced wildlife.

To avoid health problems, follow these tips.

- ♦ **Follow public announcements.** Local authorities will provide valuable information about road closings, and the safety of tap water for cooking and bathing. If the water is not safe, they will tell you to use bottled water, or to boil and disinfect tap water.
- ♦ **Avoid riding, driving or walking through flooded areas.** Follow all warnings about water on roadways. Never go around a police barricade. In flooded areas, washouts may have weakened roads and bridges, and they could collapse under the weight of your vehicle. If you have to work in or near floodwater, wear a life jacket.
- ♦ **Wear protective clothing, sturdy shoes and gloves.** When working, wear a hard hat, goggles, heavy work gloves and watertight boots with steel toes and insoles (not just steel shanks). Protective clothing is especially important when handling chainsaws and other large pieces of equipment used in clearing debris.
- ♦ **Avoid unstable buildings and structures.** Be careful around damaged buildings and trees. Leave immediately if you hear shifting or unusual noises that signal the structure may fall.
- ♦ **Beware of electrical and fire hazards.** Never touch any building, car or other structure which has a fallen power line touching it. Avoid contact with overhead power lines during cleanup and other activities. Do not burn candles near flammable items or leave candles unattended. If possible, use flashlights or other battery-operated lights instead of candles. Call a professional electrician or power company to report a down power line or power outage.
- ♦ **Beware of gas leaks.** Avoid using flames or sparking devices until you are sure there is no natural gas leaking in the area. Natural gas leaks are the top cause of fires after a disaster. That is why you never turn gas back on by yourself. Contact your local utility company for a trained professional to restore your gas service.
- ♦ **Prevent carbon monoxide poisoning.** Carbon monoxide is an odorless, colorless gas produced by many types of equipment. It is poisonous to breathe. Do not use a portable generator, charcoal grill, camp stove and/or other gasoline and charcoal burning device in any enclosed or partially

enclosed area – even if the area has ventilation. Opening doors and windows or using fans will not prevent carbon monoxide from building up in the home. If you start to feel sick, dizzy, or weak while using a generator or other gasoline/charcoal burning device, get to fresh air right away. Seek prompt medical care.

- ♦ **Store and transport gasoline safely.** Always transport gasoline in an approved safety container. Approved containers are red and have a warning label regarding the dangers of gasoline. Do not use a glass container or a used metal container that has held other petroleum products. Gasoline is highly flammable and extremely dangerous, so take all necessary precautions when handling it. Fill approved containers to only 95 per cent capacity to allow for heat expansion. Before loading a filled, portable gasoline container into a vehicle, make sure that the cap and the air vent cap are tight. Secure the container so it doesn't tip while being transported.
- ♦ **Use chain saws safely.** Wear protective gear, including a helmet system (consisting of head, face and hearing protection). You also need cotton or leather gloves, chain saw protective chaps, and boots with steel toes. Read your owner's manual concerning kickback danger of the chain saw in order to reduce your risk of injury. Remember always to hold the chain saw firmly with both hands and do not over-reach or cut above shoulder height. Follow sharpening and maintenance instructions for the chain saw and only fill a gas-powered chain saw when the engine is cool. If the saw runs out of gas, let it cool 30 minutes before refueling.
- ♦ **Beware of wild or stray animals.** Wildlife often finds refuge in structures damaged in a storm because they provide easy access. Be aware of your surroundings and avoid wild or stray animals. Call local authorities, who are better equipped to handle live animals and can dispose of dead animals according to local guidelines.

- ♦ **Beware of snakes.** Wear snake-proof boots that are at least 10 inches high or wear snake leggings in heavy debris areas. This is where snakes are likely to be found. Use a poking stick to announce your approach when possible. If you are bitten by a poisonous snake, don't try to treat the bite yourself. Go to the nearest hospital or place of treatment immediately. It helps to note the appearance of the snake for identification and treatment purposes.
- ♦ **Pace yourself and get support.** Watch for signs of physical and emotional exhaustion or strain. Learn to recognize and deal with stress. Set priorities for clean-up tasks and pace the work. Try not to work alone. Ask family members, friends or professionals for support.
- ♦ **Prevent musculoskeletal injuries.** Use teams of two or more people to move bulky objects. Avoid lifting any material that weighs more than 50 pounds (per person). When lifting heavy debris, bend your knees and lift with your legs — not your back.
- ♦ **Avoid mosquitoes.** Prevent mosquito bites by wearing long pants, socks and long-sleeved shirts. Use insect repellents that contain DEET or Picaridin.
- ♦ **Wear sunscreen.** When working outside for extended periods of time, wear sunscreen with a minimum of SPF 30 to avoid sunburns.
- ♦ **Treat wounds.** If you get a scratch, cut or brush burn from flood debris, clean it with soap and clean water. Apply an antibiotic ointment. Seek medical attention immediately if a wound swells or drains and if you have not had a tetanus booster in the last few years.

References

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